DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 157 RC 020 753

AUTHOR Larsen, Pat
TITLE Literacy Proposal for the Community of Nose Creek, Alberta.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 15p.; In: Distance Education and Sustainable Community Development; see RC 020 746.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Adult Education; Adult Learning; *Adult Literacy; American Indian Education; Canada Natives; Community Change; Community Development; *Cree (Tribe); *Educational Needs; Foreign Countries; Illiteracy; *Literacy Education; Program Development; Program Proposals; *Relevance (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *Alberta (North); *Community Viability

ABSTRACT

This paper overviews a proposal for implementing an adult literacy program in a small tribal community in northern Alberta (Canada). The program would enhance participants' ability to manage change affecting the community's economic, social, and educational circumstances. Recent data indicate that 24 percent of Native Americans in northern Alberta lack literacy skills, 31 percent of students leave school before completing the 9th grade, and 85-97 percent of students do not complete school. Nose Creek is a remote, tribal community of 25-30 Cree, half of whom are adults. Local services are minimal and include a two-room portable public school, electric power (for some), and one mobile phone. Public schooling up to grade 9 is provided in English by one teacher and a local aide. Very few students leave their communities and families to pursue a high school education. Recently, the community has been challenged by social changes that have eroded the traditional economic base and increased the community's dependence on government assistance. Community members realize the importance of literacy development in confronting their changing circumstances and have identified three primary uses for literacy: to improve their ability to effectively communicate with public agencies, to increase their understanding of community management and interaction with mainstream society, and to develop entrepreneurial and employment skills that promote economic independence. Based on these needs, a proposed model for adult literacy education was developed by the Northland School Division, Alberta Vocational Center (AVC)-Lesser Slave Lake, Grande Prairie Regional College, and Nose Creek elders. Based on nontraditional premises, the proposal addresses objectives, learning strategies, curriculum development, instructor role, learning resources, program and student evaluation, program administration, and funding. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 400 157

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elaine L.
Maloney

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

RC 020753

BEST COPY AV

Literacy Proposal for the Community of Nose Creek, Alberta

Pat Larsen
Alberta Vocational College
Slave Lake

Introduction

This paper, based on a proposal developed in May 1989, shows the unconventional concepts that may be required to link a distance education program closely to the community. It is intended to help create sustainable and relevant programs.

Literacy Perspectus

Recently, both national and provincial attention have focused on issues relating to lack of literacy in adults. The Southam Study (1987), for instance, reports that based on performance, 20% of all Canadians do not possess adequate literacy skills to engage in life tasks common to most Canadians. In their statement on literacy (1988:1), Canadian Ministers of Education concluded that "approximately one-quarter of Canadians over the age of eighteen are inadequately educated in terms of the requirements of an industrialized, high-technology society".

Adult literacy is of particular concern in many areas of northern Alberta, especially with indigenous residents. Indeed, the Southam Study reports that the incidence of poor literacy among native populations is 24%. Further, the Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta Study (1983) reports that 31% of students leaving school do so before completing Grade 9 (an education level generally accepted in Canada as a minimum for functioning in a technological society). This Study reports that of students in remote northern communities (most of whom are indigenous residents) 85-97% starting Grade 1 do not complete their schooling. If, as some research indicates, schooling is a primary indicator of literacy, it may be assumed that the incidence of illiteracy among remote northern Alberta native persons is considerable.

Historical factors lending to the lack of education (and, by inference, literacy) in northern indigenous adults are numerous: limited or no access to schooling, cultural/religious/economic traditions which do not depend on written communication, and families with histories of little literacy who tend not to encourage literacy development in their members.

Illiteracy in itself, however, does not become a problem for adults until they, because of demands made by their changing circumstances, perceive themselves as requiring such skills. For example, adults do not tend to improve literacy skills until there is a purpose for doing so; a purpose which is meaningful to them. The purposes adults have for literacy are derived from the demands placed on them by their roles, their settings and their aspirations. Thus, to be effective and to affect change, literacy development must be directly tied to what the individual perceives as required to serve his/her needs.

Contributing to the need of indigenous northerners for literacy development are increasing demands made by mainstream society and technologies. For instance, traditional native entrepreneurial endeavours such as fishing, trapping and hunting, all of which are historically nonliteracy-based economic activities, are being seriously eroded by economic development such as the oil and forestry industries. These mainstream activities have generated the need for indigenous persons to acquire particular types and levels of literacy skills either to participate in these mainstream economic movements or to initiate other non-traditional economic alternatives. In other northern areas, traditional native entrepreneurial efforts are continuing but with the added dimension that particular levels and types of literacy skills are now required to operate competitively, environmentally and within regulation. In still other areas, indigenous communities who have traditionally used oral procedures to manage their community's development and affairs are now expected by

mainstream society to adopt planning and management practices which require reading and writing skills.

These are but limited examples of the changing circumstances of northern indigenous residents. They demonstrate, however, that each context brings with it specific and practical purposes for literacy. It also becomes evident that a conventional Grade 9 education which, for the most part, is not designed for adults and their purposes, may be inappropriate.

In summary, if adult literacy is to be viewed as a tool for change, there are three guiding premises:

1. literacy must be perceived by the indigenous person as having a purpose;

2. the purpose an indigenous person has for literacy is strongly tied to how that person wishes to use literacy in his/her particular setting; and

3. how the adult wishes to use literacy determines the type and level of literacy development required.

Determining the purposes, uses, and types and levels of literacy needed requires considerable input from those seeking literacy development. As well, the composition and structure of any proposed literacy program must be developed in consort with those most affected—the potential adult learner.

It is from this perspective that Grande Prairie Regional College, Northland School Division and Alberta Vocational Centre (AVC)-Lesser Slave Lake entered into discussions with the adult residents of the northern indigenous community of Nose Creek, Alberta.

Community Profile, Context and Literacy Needs

Nose Creek, 60 miles south of Grande Prairie, is an unincorporated community of 25-30 residents, half of whom are adult. This picturesque mountain settlement is approximately 24 years old and has a family-defined population with historical links to native persons in the Grande Cache area. The leadership is primarily matriarchal.

The only local services are a two-room portable public school, power (for some), and one mobile phone. Government and retail services are accessed by gravelled oil-industry roads 60 miles to Grande Prairie or 40 miles to the small community of Grovedale. The mobile phone, located in the school, has limited access by the community and limited capabilities.

The primary source of income has shifted from traditional indigenous entrepreneurial activities to social assistance. There is, however, a strong sense of community, and the dignity of the culture and its traditions is much in evidence.

Public schooling up to a grade 9 level is provided in English by one Northland School Division teacher and a local aide. Their instructional activities focus, for the most part, on the elementary levels. The junior high school program is primarily correspondence based. Currently, children must leave the community and their families to pursue a high school education. Needless to say, high school graduates are an exception. The Northland school division is negotiating for data and voice communication lines in order to use distance education modes for high school students. This is a major and expensive undertaking as there are currently no communication lines into the community and the project requires the cooperation of many government departments. The majority of adults in the community range in age from 30-50, and have a history of no schooling. In addition, they have not been provided with adult education programs either formal or informal. Their first language is Cree and they speak little English. The children, however, appear to be bilingual. An interpreter is needed for dialoguing with most of the adults, in particular the elders.

The community is challenged by the demands of numerous changing circumstances—all of which, in the view of the residents, contribute to the community's need to reassess and rebuild its human resources and economic capabilities. Some of these changing circumstances are:

1. the erosion of a traditional economic base, coupled with considerable growth in industrial activity and government planning for major recreational development in the area immediately surrounding the community;

2. the community's lack of wherewithall and know how to develop economic alternatives which can replace traditional means of support and which are suitable to the particular skills and aspirations of community residents;

3. the community's increasing dependence on government assistance at the expense of community and individual independence and self-sufficiency;

4. the expectations by others for residents to manage their community affairs in ways which are compatible with mainstream society eg. taxes, land management and stewardship, utilities, etc.;

BEST COPY

5. the growing awareness by adult residents that they must be able to better express themselves to and become involved with those agencies of mainstream society which have an impact on the destiny and education of their children;

6. the increasing determination of the community to manage the integration of their community with mainstream society without sacrificing the qualities of their culture.

7. The community elder has assessed the demands of the changing circumstances; and in her view and thus the view of her people (for this is a concensus society), approximately 8-10 adults in the community require new skills and knowledge, the core of which is literacy which is "purpose-specific".

Purpose for Literacy

The specific purpose of such literacy development would be to enhance the abilities of the adult residents to affect and manage positive change in their community's economic, social, and educational situation.

Uses for Literacy

Toward this purpose, the Nose Creek adults have three primary uses for literacy. They plan to use literacy for:

1. improving their abilities to communicate effectively in a diversity of ways with those publics of concern to them (i.e. education authorities, government agencies, industry, business, health authorities, etc.);

2. increasing their knowledge and understanding of community management and how their community can more effectively interact with mainstream society; and

3. developing their entrepreneurial and employment skills, and thus their potential for economic independence.

In short, literacy development is not viewed by these adults as an end in itself; nor is it viewed as preparatory for "something down the road". Rather, literacy is seen as a tool for making change in the community's current situation and by implication, there will be change in the future.

AVAILABLE

Type and Level of Literacy

Nose Creek residents view literacy development as the acquisition of reading, writing, oral and numerary skills in the context of real-life situations. i.e. literacy skills are to be learned by using them to communicate with the community's significant publics, by managing the affairs of the community, and by developing the community's economic independence. It is these uses for literacy which determine the type and level of literacy needed.

The type of literacy needed is best described through example. Listed below are the three primary uses for literacy, each accompanied by examples of real-life experiences which can be used to acquire literacy skills pertinent to Nose Creek adults.

1. In regard to communicating with a significant public (eg. education authority), literacy skills can be learned through analysing supports and barriers to educating community residents; researching and reporting on the community's educational needs, strengths and issues; preparing and sending pertinent reports and correspondence; orally conversing in English (via telephone and in person) with school personnel and adult education institutions; etc.

2. In regard to managing their community, literacy skills can be learned through accessing and analysing information about the community's health, education, recreation, social and economic needs; identifying potential community resources; planning for and calculating costs and profits for community enterprises; adopting long and short-term planning strategies; exploring conflict resolution techniques; implementing workable decision-making procedures; introducing prevention strategies for health and social problems, etc.

3. In regard to economic independence, literacy skills can be learned through planning and conducting a local labour market analysis; preparing and disseminating resumes; adopting financial planning procedures; practising managed consumerism; participating in job interviews; developing an entrepreneurial plan; etc.

The level to which these literacy skills are acquired is determined by the adult learners' satisfaction at having reached a point which they consider adequate for their uses. As it is not the acquisition of the skills themselves that is important, but how well the skills serve the adults in their various situations that is significant, the level of literacy is relative rather than finite. Therefore, the primary determiner of the level of literacy to be acquired is the individual.

BEST COPY

It may be said then, that the emphasis in this approach to literacy development is on the functionality of the adults in their particular context.

Proposed Program Model

Although a number of literacy program initiatives have been implemented in northern Alberta through Adult Basic Education (ABE) and tutoring endeavours, their accessibility by native residents is limited. In the Adult Literacy in Northern Alberta Study (1988), northern literacy practitioners and residents report that native adults are one of the most significant groups underserved by current literacy programs. In addition, there is evidence that few of these programs are based on a comprehensive assessment and understanding of the purposes and uses indigenous adults have for literacy in their particular situations. Thus, the types and levels of literacy development offered are, for the most part, inappropriate to the needs of specific native populations.

In a serious attempt to overcome these programming deficiencies and to focus on those literacy skills which, from the perspective of the residents, are most relevant, Northland School Division, AVC-Lesser Slave Lake and Grande Prairie Regional College collaborated with Nose Creek elders in assessing the literacy needs of the community. In the view of the participating parties, these needs can best be met by providing the community with a "purpose-specific" literacy program which develops adult literacy skills using the current, real-life situations and concerns of the community and its residents.

It is anticipated that this "purpose-specific" approach to literacy programming will not only be relevant to Nose Creek adults, but also highly applicable to the needs of other northern Alberta indigenous groups. Thus, in developing the program and its learning resources, serious consideration will be afforded the program's appropriateness to other indigenous populations with similar purposes and uses for literacy.

Program Premises: All programs are anchored in assumptions, some explicit, others implicit. For this proposal, it is important to clarify the foundational premises supporting the provision of a "purpose-specific" literacy program to Nose Creek. It is the belief of the participating parties that:

1. the adults of Nose Creek already possess a diversity of worthwhile skills and breadth of knowledge which contribute to their current functionality as adults. Although, for the most part, these are not literacy skills, they contribute much to what makes literacy usable. Therefore, they are to be respected and applied in the literacy development process;

VAILABLE

2. adult literacy development is most relevant and successful when it is evident to the learner that literacy skills can be used to change current circumstances. Thus, literacy can be effectively acquired through the exploration and resolution of actual and meaningful situations of concern to the learner.

3. adult learners are full partners with teaching resources in the literacy development process. Therefore, their participation is essential in all phases of the program's development, implementation and evaluation.

Program Intent: The primary intents of this "purpose-specific" program are:

1. to provide Nose Creek adults with the type and level of literacy skills which, to their satisfaction, are required to communicate with their significant publics, manage their community affairs and move toward economic self-sufficiency;

2. to provide opportunities for Nose Creek adults to develop literacy skills by using the experiences and situations of the residents and community;

3. to develop learning/instructional resources appropriate to the specific uses the residents have for literacy in their locale; and

4. to actively respect the integrity and aspirations of the community and the wisdom, skills and knowledge of its residents.

Program Approach and Practices: Acquiring literacy skills by using actual adult-focused situations is an approach to learning which recognizes that skill and knowledge building are interdependent; and that learning must be meaningful to the learner. This approach is similar to the "whole-language" literacy program used in several elementary schools, the difference being that the situations and learning resources used are relevant to adults, not children.

Curriculum: Uses for literacy give direction, goals, and parameters to the program. The program, however, is not incumbent on a curriculum which is prescribed or pre-determined. Instead, the curriculum is developed in consort with the learners as learning progresses. This approach to curriculum development

1. provides considerable flexibility in attending to the diversity of learning needs typically found in adult groups;

BEST COPY

2. gives credence to the belief that adult learners have much to contribute to their own learning; and

3. assures, in an on-going way, that what is learned and how it is learned is meaningful to the learner.

Instructor: Using this approach, the traditional role of the instructor as the primary source of information and controller of the learning experience is inappropriate. Rather, the instructor becomes a learning facilitator whose fundamental task is, as much as possible, to support and guide the learner as opposed to leading and directing the learner. This means that the instructor is, a "significant helper", not a content specialist, and that his/her involvement in the adult's learning decreases as the adult's skills and know-how increase.

Learning Resources: This approach to curriculum also requires a non-traditional view of what constitutes learning materials and resources. Conventional approaches to literacy development tend to use prescribed materials often associated with schooling. In contrast, a situational or context approach to literacy development utilizes information (materials and expertise) from numerous sources which are pertinent to the uses the learners have for literacy. For instance, if the use for literacy is to establish and operate on entrepreneurial enterprise, learning resources are extracted from organizations and agencies concerned with business development, planning, consumerism, accounting, management, etc. These materials are then modified for the use of the learner. At the same time, the learner is assisted in increasing his/her literacy skills to use the information effectively. In instances where no materials are available, new materials may be developed to serve the adult's particular uses for literacy.

Learning Site: As well, this situational approach to literacy development demands a non-traditional view of what constitutes a learning site. Conventional programs tend to use a classroom as the place where most learning and teaching occurs. The proposed program, however, considers all locations pertinent to the learner's uses for literacy as learning sites. Thus, locations where activities such as meeting with school authorities, purchasing goods and services, telephone conversations with business development authorities, etc., occur, are viewed as places of learning; and the use of reading, writing, oral, and numerary skills at these sites becomes the curriculum.

Evaluation: There are two types of evaluation needed to determine the success of any literacy development endeavour: learner evaluation and program evaluation.

First, in traditional endeavours, learners are usually evaluated against absolute goals and/or specific standards. Persons not acquiring these standards or goals are usually referred to as 'incompletes' or 'failures'. In contrast, the success of Nose Creek learners is determined by the degree to which the residents are able to increase their use of literacy skills in the three areas outlined in this proposal. To measure the degree of change in their literacy functionality, it is necessary, at the onset of the program, to take an account of how well and in what ways the adults currently use oral, numerical and written literacy in communicating with significant others, in managing their community and in operating with economic self-sufficiency. As well, it is important to identify their level of satisfaction with their current literacy skills and know-how. This, then becomes the baseline for determining the degree of change in their literacy functionality as their learning progresses. Both research and practice emphasize that the learner's perception of their own literacy abilities is a key factor in determining the success of the learning and the program. The role of the instructor (facilitator) is to provide on-going assistance to the learners in identifying the changes in their functionality because of the acquisition and application of new literacy skills. There are no failures, in the traditional sense. Rather, there are learners who are demonstrating and expressing change in their situation as a result of literacy development.

Second, the proposed program is to be evaluated from two perspectives: those of the community and the participating institutions. From the community's perspective, the focus of the program evaluation is on: the ways in which the program has served the stated uses the community has for literacy; the ways in which the program's structure, practices and operations have affected the lifestyle and traditions of the community; and the ways the program should be modified to serve the interests and integrity of the community.

This program evaluation will be conducted every six months throughout the duration of the program.

From the institutions' perspective, the focus of the program evaluation is on the impact and effectiveness of the program's non-traditional approach to literacy development in terms of the following program components:

i. the facilitators role, training and instructional practices
ii. the learning materials used and developed
iii. the resources and support systems used
iv. the program's structure and operation
v. the modifications required for each program component.

For this evaluation, participation by individual learners and the instructor is required. As well, the institutions must determine the effect the program ha had on their respective modus operendi. In short, evaluation of this literacy development endeavour is the composite perspectives of the community, the learners and the institutions.

Program Structure and Operations: In order for the program to actively respect the integrity of the community, it must operate in ways which are conducive to the lifestyle, traditions and operations of the residents.

Timeframe: The desire of the community is to have a full-time literacy program. It is proposed that this program operate for two years.

Scheduling: The residents must view the times scheduled for learning as compatible and not competing with the other important functions in their liv Thus it is proposed that the learner participants determine, within the progra year, the times which are most suitable to them. A guide of 25 hours per week, which usually constitutes a conventional full-time program, will be used.

Learner Participation: The program will be made available to all Nose Cre residents who, in the view of the community, are adults. Recruitment and monitoring of learner participation will be conducted by the community.

Program Personnel: The program will have one full-time learning facilitat with training/experience in purposive literacy development, development o employment and entrepreneurial skills, and community management. Preference will, however, be given to a local Cree-speaking person, who w training and on-going support (if needed) from a program coordinator, demonstrates potential for this role. The function of this staff would be to assess specific learning needs, assist the residents in acquiring reading, writing, oral and numeracy skills necessary for the community's purposes, provide learners with resources and opportunities for appropriate, meaning applications of these skills. This person should be prepared to live in the community for two years.

A one-half time professional program coordinator will monitor the progran and provide on-going training, advisement, and support to the local facilita As well, the coordinator will be responsible for acquiring and developing learning materials for the specific uses Nose Creek adults have for literacy. This person will also be charged with ensuring that appropriate tools and strategies for the skills inventory and the evaluations are designed and implemented.

The coordinator is the community's primary contact with the institutions involved, while the facilitator is the learner's primary contact in the program. If the program is assessed as serving the needs of additional communities, the coordinator's role may expand to full-time. If, by the second year of operation, there are no other communities involved, the coordinator position may be reduced to one-third time.

It is essential that the community elders be full partners with Grande Prairie Regional College in the selection of the local instructor. The selection/appointment of the program coordinator will be the responsibility of the College, with advisement from the community.

Cooperating Institutions: Grande Prairie Regional College will be the primary institution involved with the program. They will ensure the orientation and training of the local facilitator in the areas of purposive literacy, community, economic and adult development. In addition, they will administer and manage program operations, provide consultation and supervision to the program coordinator, supplement learning resources from existing inventories, and participate in the evaluation of the program. AVC-Lesser Slave Lake and Northland School Division will provide similar functions at the request of Grande Prairie Regional College. Existing learner support services, eg. counselling and libraries, in the area will be used when required.

Facilities and Equipment: A room in the local school will be made available by Northland School Division for the program's headquarters. Instructional equipment will be provided by the cooperating institutions.

Financial Support / Conclusion

And finally, in order for this literacy development endeavour to be realized, two types of funding are required: learner financing and program financing.

Learner Support: Some of the potential participants are in need of financial assistance in order to participate in the program. Several who are currently on social assistance have made it known that they prefer to relinquish this source of income in favour of learning allowances, even though they will forfeit particular benefits such as medical coverage. This proposal respects this decision by potential learners.

Program Support: There are several unique factors which must be considered when determining the cost of the proposed program. For instance the historical lack of resources to this community and, as a result, the need for basic literacy as well as "purpose-specific" literacy, necessitates that a program be offered over an extended period, i.e. two years; the geographic and logistical circumstances of the community means that delivery, training and consultation services require considerable time and travel.

The proposed non-traditional approach to knowledge and skill development of learners and to evaluation necessitates ambitious accessing and developing of appropriate resources and expertise. These factors are primary determiners of the financial support needed and, if the program is to be successful, cannot be reduced or ignored.